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AUTHOR Decker, Warren D.
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ABSTRACT

The Senior Seminar in Communication Theory at George Mason University was originally designed to provide graduating seniors with an opportunity to study a variety of communication theories from all areas of the discipline. More recently it has also been used as a "capstone" course to assess student outcomes, allowing faculty to observe a number of behaviors which each communication graduate should exhibit. Student outcomes are assessed via a number of assignments which are designed to allow the evaluation of a wide range of cognitive information and communication skills. Each student is required to work within a group and prepare a seminar report on a specific theory. The class has a midterm and a final examination, each containing 10 questions. Many of the questions require both application and critical analysis of theory, as well as a synthesis of information. Class participation accounts for 10% of the grade. Final individual papers describe a selected theory, criticize it, and indicate a setting to which it can be applied. Students must obtain a grade of "C" or better in this course in order to graduate. (An appendix contains the seminar report evaluation form.) (SR)

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THE SENIOR SEMINAR IN COMMUNICATION THEORY AS AN ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

Warren D. Decker
Department of Communication
George Mason University

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a paper presented at the
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THE SENIOR SEMINAR IN COMMUNICATION THEORY AS AN ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

During the past few years there has been a significant increase in the level of concern regarding the measurement of student outcomes in the classroom. Most of this concern appears to be directly connected with the movement to make educators more accountable for what they produce. The impact of this movement on the classroom is still not clear, but many educators have already responded to the call for accountability. The course (Communication 420: Senior Seminar in Theories of Communicative Interaction) which will be discussed in this paper was not originally a reaction to this call, but the existence of this course allowed us to make minimal changes and use it for that purpose.

The Senior Seminar in Communication Theory at George Mason University was originally designed to provide graduating seniors with an opportunity to study a variety of communication theories from across the communication discipline. A primary purpose of the course was to introduce the students to the commonalities which exist between theories in the variety of subdisciplines in the discipline of communication. The course attempts to cover theory from all areas of communication including theories of rhetoric mass

communication, interpersonal-small group, organizational, etc. It was the belief of the originators that an understanding of the similarities would enrich student understanding of individual theories. The course was originally an elective and was taught as a seminar course, with limited enrollment. More recently the course was identified as one of a group of courses which should be required for all majors. A grade of "C" or better must be earned in order to successfully complete the course.

An additional peculiarity of the course is that it is team taught. Given the amount and diversity of the material covered in the course the decision was made to use two instructors to allow for increased accuracy when discussing theories from different areas. To date one of the instructors for this course has been trained in mass communication and one more generally in speech communication. The most interesting benefit of team teaching is the opportunity to fuel cross talk related to both theory and research in the diverse areas and issues which confront communication students. For example, having an empiricist and a critical theorist represented allows for some provocative and informative discussions. Perhaps the area of theory is not as significant as the method of research selected by the instructors.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The Seminar in Communicative Interaction has a number of objectives. The primary objective of the course is to provide instruction regarding the predominant theories/perspectives of

communication. Secondarily, the course provides the opportunity to evaluate student outcomes. Specifically, their knowledge of theory and their skill levels in oral and written communication. Additionally, it is planned that each student will have a broad foundation in communication theory, as well as, having detailed mastery of a theory which they have selected as the focus of their paper and in some cases their seminar report. The aim is to have each student have at least one theory which they have detailed familiarity with so that they might utilize that theory in future situations.

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Student outcomes are assessed by way of a number of assignments. The assignments are designed to allow the evaluation of a wide range of cognitive information and communication skills. It is the desire of the Communication faculty at George Mason to get a broad range of information to facilitate an extensive and fair evaluation of each graduating senior. The thinking is that the more opportunities that students have to perform and the more diverse types of performance the fairer the measure for students. Given enrollment pressures students who enroll in 420 are usually in their final semester of undergraduate study.

SEMINAR REPORT

Each student is required to work within a group and prepare a seminar report on a specific theory. The theory is selected from

a list provided by the instructors. The group prepares a presentation which provides a description of the theory, an overview of the research generated by the theory, biographical information about the authors of the theory, a critique of the theory, and a description of the connections between their theory and other theories. A form (see Appendix 1) has been devised to use while evaluating the reports which helps to assure some standardization of grading and detailed feedback to the student. Students are given individual grades on the seminar report.

EXAMINATIONS

There is a midterm and final examination in the class. Each examination contains ten questions. The questions are selected from a list of approximately sixty questions given to the students as a study guide. Each week the students are provided with a list of ten to fifteen questions based on the lecture-discussions, seminar reports, textbook, or readings for that week so that they are not overwhelmed by a list of all sixty. The list is distributed after the material is presented to minimize the selectivity of attention which might be created by the lists distribution prior to the presentation of that material. The extensive nature of the study guide allows the instructors to guide the attention of the students to what they think to be the appropriate material. Many of the questions require application of and critical analysis of theory, as well as, a synthesis of information. The study guide is supposed to function as a teaching

tool and to allay fears associated with covering a large body of diverse information. It also allows us to standardize our evaluation across semesters and hopefully increase the accuracy of the measurement of student outcomes.

CLASS PARTICIPATION

The class was originally taught as a seminar and we have attempted to follow that mode to the extent possible in a large class. The enrollment now ranges from 40 to 55. Participation is encouraged by assigning ten percent of the grade to participation. Records are kept during the semester of student comments, along with attendance as a basis for this portion of the grade.

FINAL PAPER

The assignment for the paper in the class is also designed so that each paper must include some of the same characteristics. We ask that each student select a theory and the first section of the paper describes that theory. They must also criticize that theory based on the functions of theory in their textbook and they must indicate a setting to which this theory can be applied. The setting may be a research setting or a vocational setting. A portion of their evaluation of the theory can be based upon the ability to apply the theory to that setting.

Having somewhat common expectations of what the paper will look like allows the instructors to grade the paper based upon

those common characteristics, therefore, achieving some degree of uniformity in grading. Midway through the course the students are required to submit an abstract which provides an outline of their paper so that the instructors can correct for any glaring misdirection in this assignment. The abstract is ungraded.

ASSESSMENT ISSUES

As mentioned earlier students must attain a grade of "C" or better in 420 in order to graduate. The number of persons who achieve this level are a fairly good indication of the strength of our overall program, but it is more precisely an indication about how seriously they took this particular course. It is also of interest to note that given a "C" or better that this is an indication of deficiencies rather than high levels of achievement. The issue here is whether or not the assessment of a program should be more discriminatory than satisfactory/unsatisfactory.

Another issue concerns the use of multiple measures to assess students. One might gather additional information by studying each measure alone and determining whether the individual measures would indicate anything meaningful for the program. While multiple measures are an advantage when providing an overall evaluation of a student they might mask some weaknesses or strengths as a program measure.

I might also mention that students who fail to perform at the "C" level initially are given the opportunity to rewrite their paper if they can improve their course grade enough to pass via the

rewrite. This allows a safety valve for students who might have been exceptionally weak in one area. This also allows us to encourage mastery of the written assignment.

CONCLUSION

Our experience with the use of a "capstone" course as a method of assessing student outcomes has been fairly positive. The course allows us to observe a number of behaviors which we think each communication graduate should exhibit. They should have a broad knowledge of the theories of communication and they should be able to express themselves both orally and in writing.

APPENDIX I

SEMINAR REPORT EVALUATION

SENIOR SEMINAR: APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION

Student Name: _____

Seminar Report Topic: _____

Date: _____

The following characteristics of your seminar report have been evaluated utilizing a 100 point scale with 70 equating to a grade of "C". This report is worth 15% of your grade.

(20) Accuracy of Information:

(20) Critical analysis/synthesis of the material:
Displayed knowledge of backgrounds of authors.
Related to material from previous reports.

(10) Evaluated theory in the context of Littlejohn's criteria for a good theory.

(10) Organization of material:

(10) Clarification of material:
Use of examples and illustrations.
Use of audio-visual aids (slides, posters, use of blackboard).

Class outline.

(10) Stimulation of classroom discussion.

(10) Extemporaneous style of presentation (supporting notes are acceptable):

(10) Peer Evaluation

OVERALL GRADE:

GENERAL COMMENTS: